

THE PROFESSIONAL IN A SMALL JEWISH COMMUNITY

MARILYN FORMAN CHANDLER

Executive Director, Greensboro Jewish Federation, Greensboro, North Carolina

Being a professional in a small federation means filling multiple functions, serving as a Jewish role model for both the Jewish and general community, and having one's personal and professional life open to greater scrutiny than in larger communities. The effectiveness of small federations can be enhanced in many ways; doing so is particularly important in light of the movement of large numbers of Jews to emerging communities in the South and West.

DEFINING THE SMALL JEWISH COMMUNITY

Small Jewish communities are not homogeneous in nature. There are, in fact, close to 70 professionally directed small city federations listed in the Council of Jewish Federations (CJF) Directory, in addition to another 26 volunteer-directed communities. For example, in my former community—Orange County, New York—I worked in eight distinct small Jewish communities (each under 1,000 families) within eight distinct small cities (under 25,000 total community population). In the community in which I currently live and work, Greensboro, North Carolina, our Jewish population is approximately 2,500 of a total citywide population hovering around 200,000. Many smaller federations mirror both of my experiences—a small Jewish population within a small city and one in a larger metropolitan community. For sure, no two communities are identical and to generalize would be impossible; I therefore speak from my own experience in presenting the important role that smaller communities can play in the overall federation movement.

This article is dedicated to my colleagues who have been my mentors and supporters in the years that I have grown in this profession and to the lay leaders who have taught me the differences between lay and professional roles along the way.

It is also dedicated with love and affection to my newborn, Shira, who at 6 months of age woke me daily so that I could begin my writing at 5 a.m. sharp!

Smaller communities cover our continent—geographically, politically, and socially. The meaningful role that smaller communities play in changing the national picture cannot be emphasized enough. The impact of our mere numbers dispersed throughout the continent and of our key contacts on our elected officials can be enormous—especially in out-of-the-way places.

LIFE IN A SMALL JEWISH COMMUNITY

The term “small community” implies less, when in fact, the quality of Jewish life can be much, much better than in a larger city. Small communities in many ways have much more to offer Jewish families than a large city Jewish community in which anonymity often plays a key role in determining relationships. (Having grown up in New York, I too was taught to avoid people's eyes at all costs on the streets and subways of Manhattan.) Individuals living in our midst feel a deep sense of commitment in creating a caring and sophisticated community in which they live and work. We feel invested in the success of the total Jewish and general community.

Being a professional in a smaller Jewish community is personally and professionally fulfilling and exhilarating, although totally exhausting and overwhelming. Professionals serving the Jewish community are small in number, and the pool of potential profes-

sionals from which to hire is limited. Many women come up through the ranks as lay leaders turned professional for just this reason. I am one of the few women executives professionally trained in the field of Jewish communal service/social work. Sometimes uncomfortable political situations arise, especially in the hiring and firing of employees, because of the realities of limited personnel. An example would be hiring the spouse of another Jewish communal worker as a federation or agency staff member. "Peyton Place" experiences are not uncommon, no matter how large or small the community, although the grapevine works much faster the smaller the community.

It also costs more for a professional to live in a small community. One leads by example. Campaign pledges, contributions to local synagogues (we are expected to be members of all congregations in many communities), day school tuitions, and gifts for all of the *simchas* one is invited to (and reciprocal *simcha* invitations) become costly, although they certainly make one feel part of the community. Even though the federation director is not a rabbi, he or she is often viewed as someone who needs to do the right thing, i.e., doing *Bikor Cholim* (sick) visits, attending funerals, participating in *shivah* minyans, and life-cycle events, and making cameo appearances at appropriate community events, both Jewish and general. Our absence is noticed and noted.

The strain on the family of a small federation executive is great. Professionals may attend committee and board meetings nightly and social and community events on the weekends. In addition, the spouse of the executive is always expected at federation/community functions. In some situations, spouses put their lives on hold while moving with the federation executive to a smaller community. There may be limited opportunities for a spouse's employment in these communities, and although the Jewish community may be interested in doing all it can to open doors to potential employment opportunities, this is often not realistic or

feasible. Yet, there are many conveniences for those of us living in small communities. I live 8 minutes from work and one mile from our synagogue and the Jewish day school. It is wonderful to see my preschooler in the temple playground outside my downtown office window during the day.

Federation executives are also viewed as the representative of the Jewish community to the general community and the media. Our name and photo are often known, for better or for worse, by many members of the Jewish and general communities. For example, in the first days of the 1991 Gulf War, I was the first representative of the Jewish community called by a local television station to provide commentary.

Certainly, the other factor that has a major effect on my professional and personal life is working in the South. Despite the fact that I never thought I would leave the New York skyline, I have never regretted the move. They do things differently down here, and not just in terms of Southern hospitality. Life in the South is more formal than in the North. Here, we attend catered sit-down dinners for fifty in people's homes and guests wear formal attire for meetings, programs, and the like. Yet, the formality does not get in the way of involvement in Jewish communal life; it only enhances it.

Two Jewish brothers, Moses and Caesar Cone of Cone Mills/denim fame, made their way to Greensboro in the late 1800s. After successfully achieving their business aspirations, they began a tradition in Greensboro of giving back to the community—philanthropically—that has continued to this day. They laid the groundwork for the acceptance and involvement of Greensboro's Jewish community in the general community. It is in Greensboro that I began to understand the term "professional volunteer" because there are so many volunteers here who are as committed to their work as I am.

A family moving to Greensboro from a major metropolitan community can be immediately engulfed in the volunteer network

of our Jewish community, if they so desire. Anonymity is not possible unless it is sought. The word "federation" is made a household word (love it or not), and it is not always synonymous with "run the other way." The only problem I have encountered with Southerners is trying to pronounce our name correctly: "What is the Jewish Confederation, Ma'am?"

The seriousness with which the community responds to its Jewish obligations is refreshing. Individuals make donations to Jewish institutions and programs on a regular basis (as honorariums/memorials), as doing so is built into the structure and dynamics of the community. Despite the fact that we are small, we are able to support and sustain two thriving synagogues, a Jewish day school through junior high school with over 150 students, a North Carolina Jewish Home for the Aged, a strong statewide Hillel program, a forceful Hadassah chapter, and major federation programs.

Peer pressure is a tremendously effective community asset in a community like Greensboro. Participation in adult study missions to Israel, youth summer and year-long trips to Israel, and Jewish summer camps has become the "in thing." The Lion of Judah and Pomegranate pins have become socially accepted as giving levels for our Women's Cabinet and, coupled with active lay involvement in the federation campaign, have made Greensboro one of the highest per capita giving communities in the county.

HOW DOES A SMALL COMMUNITY FEDERATION SYSTEM OPERATE?

The small Jewish community plays a major role in developing lay leadership, both in the Jewish and general community, and in developing emerging professional staff.

The Professional in the Small Jewish Community

The Orange County Jewish community leadership took a chance when they hired

me. I was only 23 when I assumed the position as executive director. They gave me many opportunities to learn and grow on the job. This would have been totally unrealistic in a large city.

A small community federation does and is expected to do everything a large city federation does with less staff (often only one practitioner) and more volunteers (cast of hundreds). Smaller federations can encourage great volunteer enthusiasm within a limited pool of lay leadership who wear more than one hat. Certainly, the economic level of the community dictates the availability of free time and flexibility of movement on the part of both men and women volunteers.

It can be difficult for those not in smaller communities to comprehend that the executive, the campaign director, women's division director, CRC director, newspaper editor, etc., are often one and the same individual. Whenever I receive the CJF Personnel Survey with blanks for all of the potential staff members, I laugh. For the most part, I am it—all of the above and then some. This same individual reads all of the mail (directed to every staff position that does not exist but for whom CJF has a department), staffs all of the committees and subcommittees (at any one time we staff some 20 to 30 committees), and works in partnership with all of the volunteers. This sole practitioner must also respond to all those lay leaders who attend national meetings and conferences and come back home asking, "Why aren't we doing that program here?"

One of the major obstacles we professionals face in transferring our skills from smaller to larger communities is our limited experience working with large numbers of professionals on our staffs. In a small community we are involved in everything, and relinquishing control often translates to no staff involvement at all. Learning to delegate tasks, supervise larger numbers of staff, and handle a larger agenda are the major hurdles a small federation executive

would have to surmount in a larger community.

Expectations of the executive are high, while salaries are often lower. The personal and professional lives of executives are open and visible and are therefore open to greater scrutiny by our communities. Executives seem to move around a lot, although this may not be specific to smaller federations. Many of my colleagues do not leave on the best of terms with their communities, and some of the rumors that come to my ears are horror stories. For sure, the nature of our agencies as emissaries of Jewish tradition and of *gemilut hasadim*—acts of lovingkindness—should pertain to lay-professional relationships, specifically in the firing practices of our communities. No professional today should be so unaware of his or her performance as to be totally blind about an ensuing pink slip tomorrow.

Many small community federations are functional federations. They not only plan campaign-related programs but also sponsor educational events, community commemorations, and celebrations; organize Jewish Community Center programs; and offer Jewish Family Services under the federation umbrella. Many of these programs are planned in conjunction with local congregations and agencies, and for this reason, strong synagogue-federation relations are essential to the success of the federation. Rabbis are strongly encouraged to participate in missions to Israel sponsored by the federation. They are essential in planning joint community programs and in promoting events from the *bimah*.

Executives are certainly isolated from other federation colleagues, yet we find friends in rabbis, other agency executives, professionals on our staff, and lay leaders with whom we can talk *tachlis*. Relationships between professionals and volunteers are much more personal than in large cities as our personal, family, and professional lives often overlap. My spouse is my confidant, and the telephone connects me long distance to my colleagues in the field. I rely

often on the expertise of our CJF field representative and the specialists in the various CJF departments in New York. I will never complain that we do not get enough services for the dues we pay!

Local Involvement on National Boards and Committees

Because we are viewed as small, we in small communities do not play with the "big boys" and are excluded from the clubs and networks of the large cities. The smaller federation presidents and executives meet independently at the GA. A small federation institute also occurs annually, and national CJF conference calls are divided by city size. A CJF Small Federations Steering Committee exists to promote smaller federations on the national scene.

Sometimes our leadership is not taken seriously enough by national federation leaders. For this and other reasons they are not as visible nationally as they should be. Some make the most of their experience, gaining access to potential speakers and programs for their community, and surely we underestimate the impact that one individual can have on national agencies and decision making. Lay leaders sometimes also set their expectations too low in terms of aspiring to positions of major national responsibility.

For small community leaders to enter the national lay structure, they need to push their way forward. Key contacts make a big difference, as does visibility on the national scene. When participation in national conferences is limited, the potential for national participation is diminished. Perhaps the true litmus test of a successful smaller community is the national impact its leadership has attained. Our community has a great track record for attending national conferences. We send 10 to 12 individuals annually to the GA, 20 or so to the Lion of Judah Conference, and as many as 35 to the Young Leadership Conference.

My experiences on national committees have allowed me to network with col-

leagues, many of whom I would not normally come into contact with, and to establish limited informal mentoring experiences with those "older and wiser." However, very few of my colleagues from smaller communities sit side-by-side with me on these or other national committees. Yet, many of these colleagues, if asked and if provided resources to attend meetings, would make valuable contributions to national discussions. For the most part, they are invisible on the national scene.

**Relationship of Small Community
Federations to Local Agencies/
Organizations**

Small Jewish federations often play an important role in their local communities that is disproportionate to their size. The Greensboro Jewish community is a model not only for other smaller Jewish communities but also for the State of North Carolina. We have provided leadership locally in our campaign, our allocations to local Jewish agencies, and in the resettlement of Jews from the former Soviet Union. We were the Matching Grant headquarters site location for the State of North Carolina and the location of a HIAS pilot project for free case placements in North Carolina. We hope to soon hire an endowment professional to be shared by the state federations.

Our federation planned its first Interfaith Mission to Israel in 1994 in conjunction with the local chapter of the National Conference of Christians and Jews. This endeavor has cemented civic, educational, religious, and business relationships community-wide.

A committee of our Community Relations Council, the Community Involvement Committee, is solely responsible for recommending Jewish community members to Greensboro city and county boards and commissions. It has become so successful that two Jewish community members, within a year of their placement, have already become chairs of their respective committees. This is another example of our

commitment to the community in which we live.

We have led the state in our affiliation with the American-Israel Chamber of Commerce Southeast Region (AICC) and have assisted them in researching and bringing together potential joint ventures between North Carolina and Israel. One lay leader from our Jewish community, with some consulting services provided by our federation, AICC, and the Government of Israel, has encouraged our governor to lead the first arts, science, and trade mission to Israel in the fall of 1995 with over 100 leaders from our state. An advance team mission has already resulted in a major educational cooperative venture between our county public schools, Hebrew University, and the National Council of Jewish Women, as well as the first major exhibition of Israeli art outside the State of Israel to be held in 1996 in North Carolina art museums.

**Relationship of Small Community
Federations to Continental Agencies**

We in smaller Jewish communities are often the last in line to participate in national programs, but it is not because we were last to get there. It is often because we were last to be asked, despite our great potential human resources. We absolutely need to be strong advocates on our own behalf on the national scene. The relationship with national agencies—CJF and other national service providers as well—is what we make it.

For example, smaller communities were thought to be too small to be effective in resettling Soviet Jews and so were not asked to assume this responsibility by the national CJF/HIAS leadership. A letter to CJF/HIAS by our community was the impetus for the creation of a national program for the resettlement of thousands of initially unfunded/unattached Soviet Jewish refugees in small American Jewish communities from 1990 to the present.

Our community is now contemplating our involvement in Partnership 2000—

again a program designed primarily by and for the large city federations with limited access by the smaller communities.

CJF Continuing Professional Education (CPE) Courses are very enticing means for Jewish communal professionals to improve their professional skills and network with colleagues. Because of limited budgets and time, executives often had to choose between registering for a CPE course at Sugar Loaf and the Small Federations Executives Institute. Sometimes some of the large city instructors have been insensitive to the needs of those professionals working in the smaller communities. Representatives of the smaller federation executives advocated for change in 1986-87 with the CJF Departments of Continuing Education and Field Services, and a CPE component was included within the Institute. Since then, smaller federation executives attending the Institute participate in a relevant course for which they receive CPE credits.

However, there are still barriers to our full participation and access to national programs and services. The CJF computer system is still not affordable for smaller federations. Most of us have developed our own systems and offer them to colleagues at various institutes. However, it was not high enough up on the national agenda to be sponsored by CJF. In another example, our community called the Wexner foundation several years ago and asked if we could bring their leadership development program to Greensboro. We were told that we had too small a pool of lay leadership from which to draw potential participants. Even though I guaranteed a supply of interested and committed individuals, I could not convince the program director to include us. So, for the moment, we have created wonderful visiting scholar and young leadership programs. I still have not given up.

Relationship of Small Community Federations to International Agencies

We use the overseas agencies for missions—both VIP and community, securing

information about overseas agencies for local contributors, and gaining references for potential Israeli teachers in our Jewish day schools, potential cantors and rabbis for the High Holidays, and the like. Sometimes we send lay leaders to a Jewish Agency Assembly and so have representation internationally at global Jewish meetings.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHANGE

Serving as the executive of a small federation is extremely rewarding, both professionally and personally. Yet, our effectiveness as professionals and our federations' ability to meet their many challenges could be enhanced in many ways. Some would require major structural changes, ambitious new programs, and major funding. Others merely require a change in attitude and emphasis of existing programs.

Implementation of these recommendations is particularly important in view of recent demographic changes. Jews are moving in large numbers from the older, established larger communities to the small, emerging ones of the South and West. They will need effective, exciting local federations to help them continue to lead committed Jewish lives.

- If pressured enough to do so, the national system will make changes to meet more effectively the needs of smaller federations. So where are all of our advocates seeking national resources to augment our limited staff, financial, computer, endowment, and lay resources? There is no major funding source specifically focused on smaller federations other than the Louis Fox Memorial Fund for the Executives Institute when it is held in Israel. Despite incredible giving potential, national endowments have not been sought that could attempt to provide services in the smaller communities. The Fair Share Program should be expanded nationwide to address the needs in smaller communities. In addition, travel subsidies for lay leaders/professionals to at-

tend national meetings and major discounts for the CJF satellite network should be provided.

- The limited number of professionally trained staff hampers the effectiveness of the overall smaller federation network. An Executive Development Program should be created that is geared for smaller communities. The mentorship process and training would be embraced by most in the field.
- The federation movement needs to be placed in an historical context for new Jewish communal professionals. We need to understand where we have been in order to know where we are going. Executive development should include Jewish ritual and life-cycle materials as small community professionals in particular are often called upon for their Jewish "expertise." Other topics to be covered could include Zionism, the federation movement, and historical perspectives on UJA and the Jewish Agency.
- Many innovative programs have been developed and tested in smaller communities. New program ideas should be tested on a small scale and then used as pilot projects for the larger communities. The Wexner leadership development model could be replicated in smaller communities. We may not have the financial resources, but we certainly have the human potential.
- Functional federations require additional support services from the national agencies. We do not have Jewish Community Centers but require guidance and support from CJF and JCCA in a way that does not currently exist. Bringing our program directors together to learn from one another and culling information from other functional federations are essential so we do not each reinvent the wheel.
- The creation of a national Jewish Chamber of Commerce that could assist us in selling smaller Jewish communities to individuals looking for a change in lifestyle would be of great value. A clearinghouse of information regarding *all-sized* Jewish communities would make it easier for individuals to choose where to live—just like our college students use resource books to choose a campus with a significant Jewish population and program. The Chamber of Commerce should work with issues related to employment and recruitment opportunities, as well as Jewish community opportunities.
- A professional requires strong support from his or her spouse. If the spouse is content with his or her life, the professional will be that much stronger. Relocation programs for spouses of executives would encourage this support.
- Finally, it is important to make smaller communities feel important and special. Do not single them out as "small" but make them partners together with the large cities in the continental agenda. Bring them together to meet jointly with communities of other sizes during GAs and Quarterly Assemblies in our joint efforts toward *tikkun olam*.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For your honesty and insights, *todah rabah* to Meyer Bodaff, executive director of the Jewish Federation of Southern Maine, and Barry Swartz, associate director of the CJF Community Services Department. For your editing skills, special thanks to Marc Stackhouse and Gail Naron Chalew.